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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3623

UNCLAS CONAKRY 000224

STATE FOR AF/PDPA
INFO ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NEW HEAD OF CNC DISCUSSES RELATIONS WITH CNDD

¶1. Summary: On April 15, PAO met with the head of the National Communications Commission, Jean Raymond Soumah. The two discussed the relationship between the commission and the ruling CNDD and the attitude of the junta towards the press. The PAO described some of the programs the Embassy will be conducting for journalists in the run up to the elections. Soumah expressed his support for press freedom and his desire to give all political parties a voice in the media prior to elections. End summary.

¶2. The PAO met with the President of the National Communication Council (CNC) to get acquainted and to discuss the role the CNC in the junta and the state of the media in Guinea. Soumah had previously served on the board of the CNC before he left in 2004 to work for Rio Tinto as communications director. In 1998, he participated in a one-month exchange program in the U.S. sponsored by USAID. He claims that after his return from this program, he held the first meeting on the liberalization of the airwaves with President Lansana Conte.

¶3. Soumah said that he has good relations with the ruling National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD) and that the CNDD knows they must respect the private media in order to get their message out. Soumah recalled a recent meeting between the CNDD and civil society where Dadis Camara, head of the CNDD, shouted at some guards who were trying to keep the independent media out of the meeting. (Comment: Some private media have complained that they are being shut out of CNDD meetings, and even the state-run Horoya newspaper complained of being excluded from important meetings. End comment.)

¶4. Soumah expressed his support for freedom of the press and outlined some things he is doing in the next couple of months to support press liberty. He is encouraging independent broadcast media to create their own association. He is also supporting a revision of the press law that was drafted by Thierno Balde, an Embassy contact. This law would reportedly create greater press freedom than the previous version, and will be rolled out on World Press Freedom Day, May 3. (Comment: Thierno Balde has discussed his new proposed press law with Embassy personnel, although he has not yet shown a final version of the law to the PAO. Furthermore, it is unclear how such a law would be passed given that there is no legal legislative body to do it. End comment.)

¶5. Soumah also said he wants RTG to give equal airtime to all political parties and candidates. He said he is disappointed that in the past RTG has not allowed access to opposition political parties or the average citizen. Finally, Soumah offered his support for upcoming Embassy events to train journalists, including the use of the large conference room at the CNC to hold events.

¶6. Comment: PAO has heard from numerous sources that Soumah is a respected journalist and a popular choice to head the CNC. This is a positive change from the previous head of the CNC. With a respected head of the CNC and a relatively progressive Minister of Information and Culture in Justin Morel Junior, Guinea has an opportunity to greatly increase the professionalism of its young journalists. It will be interesting to see, as Guinea moves towards presidential elections, whether the CNC can remain above the fray, or whether it will be used by outside forces to settle political scores or air petty grievances as it has been in the past. End comment.

